

# State gives body slam to backyard wrestling

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**W**restler Greg Skipper is "Mr. Excellent." He weighs 260 pounds, has two-toned black-and-bleached-white spiked hair, long thin sideburns and talks about moves like the "corporate cutter," where you lock your arms around the head and leg of an opponent and then flip him over your head.

Skipper, 17, who lives near the Carroll County community of Gamber, said Mr. Excellent is (in his best ring announcer imitation) the "un-dee-sputed" heavyweight champion of Ground Breaking Wrestling - a title earned on Saturday nights spent tossing his friends around a wrestling ring in his back yard for the past year.

Now the Maryland State Athletic Commission wants the backyard wrestlers, a group of about 40 to 50 people including 20 or so wrestlers, parents, friends and a few neighbors who often wander by, to cease the weekly World Wrestling Federation copycat shows.

The commission has told Skipper, co-founder of Ground Breaking Wrestling (GBW), that he and his associates risk up to six months in jail and a \$2,000 fine if they don't put an end to the corporate cutters and body slams.

No charges have been filed, but the athletic commission, which regulates professional wrestling, boxing and kick-boxing organizations in Maryland, has accused Skipper and his friends of operating without a license.

Someone could get hurt, said Patrick Pannella, executive director of the commission. Its aim is to "stop any illegal promotion or contest, which includes competitions, exhibitions, matches, performances or shows because, when such events are conducted by untrained or unlicensed persons, the likelihood of serious injury is greatly enhanced," he said.

So last Saturday night, Pannella, Carroll sheriff's deputies and state police went to Skipper's home, where he lives with his mother and stepfather, Debbie and Bruce Bouch, and stopped GBW's bouts.

"We're not out driving around, drinking, doing drugs or hanging out at the mall, for crying out loud," said Skipper, who baby-sits his aunt's children for nine hours a day and then works a

six-hour shift as a steam cook at an Owings Mills restaurant. "We're not a bunch of criminals."

GBW holds its shows behind a bungalow with white siding, a two-car garage and a lawn marred by ruts from the cars of wrestling fans.

The 16-by-16-foot ring is a flood-lighted, elevated foam-filled mat surrounded by three ropes attached to large turnbuckles anchored to 6-by-6-inch posts. To one side is a mat-level stage for the wrestlers and a sound booth for the rock music that blares between matches. In front are chairs for spectators.

Last week's shutdown upset Skipper's parents because they tried hard to be careful.

"These kids began wrestling in someone's basement, and that was unsafe," said Debbie Bouch. "I put a stop to my son's doing that, and that's when he and his friends came up with the idea to build a ring."

Bouch said she and her husband didn't agree at first. "We invited the wrestlers' parents to sit down and talk about it. We checked with our insurance agent and went about everything in the right way. If we wanted to do anything illegal, would we be doing it outside in the open, in our back yard?"

But Pannella said, "We want illegal federations to adhere to state regulations and comply with all safety concerns."

So GBW members, who can only theorize about how the commission discovered them, are left to stare at the \$1,100 ring in Skipper's back yard tonight, or try on one of the nine \$175 GBW championship belts they have purchased.

Pannella estimated there are at least 10 more amateur wrestling federations operating illegally in Maryland. Dan McDevitt, co-owner of Bone Breakers Professional Wrestling Training Center in Arbutus and one of six licensed wrestling promoters in Maryland, said he knows of at least 20 unsanctioned backyard-type federations statewide and several hundred nationally.

"The main concern of the Maryland State Athletic Commission is safety," McDevitt said.

Skipper said that his group includes three licensed professional wrestlers and that they practice moves over and over to be sure they are safely done. "Adults are always here when we practice and do our shows," he said.

One GBW member, 28-year-old Randy Brown, is a licensed pro wrestler and an emergency medical technician. "I can tell you the ring is safer, better padded, than any I've wrestled on," Brown said. "These guys have gone about doing everything in a safe way."

Gary Davis, vice president of corporate communications for the World Wrestling Federation, called attempts to emulate professional wrestlers' stunts wrong.

"It's extremely dangerous and irresponsible, and the WWF encourages parents to take control and educate young wrestlers not to attempt what they see professionals do live or on TV," he said.

Edward Edmonds, father of Ryan Edmonds, 16, said he and his son had little in common before the teen-ager got involved with Skipper and GBW co-founder Sean "Anubis" Lloyd, 19.

Now he and his eldest son, Ed Edmonds, never miss Ryan wrestling. "I live in Littlestown [Pa.] and probably talked to my little brother Ryan about twice a year before he began wrestling," said Ed Edmonds, 26. "Now we talk all the time - about wrestling - and I drive down to watch him every week."

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